**Why an Atheist Goes to Church©**

Sunday, June 7, 2015

West Shore Unitarian Universalist Church

Reverend Kathleen Rolenz

A couple of years ago, State Representative Nicki Antonio asked if I would offer the opening prayer to open the Session of the State House in Columbus, and of course I said yes. I have such admiration for our representative and the work that she does I would probably do anything she asked as long as it wasn’t illegal, immoral or fattening. But I have to tell you, that offering a prayer before a legislative body is actually a moral dilemma for me. You would think, as a Christian Unitarian Universalist who has a daily prayer practice that this would not be an issue. But you see, I believe so strongly in the separation of church and state, that it unnerves me to have prayer before government functions; it troubles me to have “In God We Trust” on our currency and I don’t believe in any public, civic state or federally sponsored expressions of religion.

So, I showed up at the appointment time, Nicki pointed me to the podium and the microphone and I began to speak: “Spirit of Life, known to us by many names and beyond all naming, be with us now…” Not a bad start – but no mention of God, just this rather amorphous “Spirit of Life,” and then I went on to pray for their constituents, including people of all faiths and people of no faith.” After it was over, I got a lot of nice comments, but two stuck with me. One person said “Nice prayer. We’re used to more…Christian sounding prayers…but I liked it.” Another was more direct. “Thanks for your prayer, Reverend,” and then, in a teasing voice, and suggesting he knew something about the Unitarian Universalists, “Did I hear any mention of God?”

I deliberately did not mention God, but of course, the very act of praying in public would suggest that there is an “object” to pray to – some supernatural or otherworldly being that we direct our prayers. Some pray-ers of prayers believe that there is no point in praying unless you believe in a God or an object that has the power to grant prayers. And yet more and more, I suspect, are falling into the Langston Hughes and Sarah McLaughlan camp – of questioning the need for God – for religion for that matter – in a world that is increasingly divided by religious zealots, ideologues and terrorists. This morning, I want to try to look at the world through the eyes of an atheist, because when you look at the world through that lens, certain behaviors and predilections become very clear; and others even more confusing, complicated and murky.

I got interested in this topic because of a series of news articles that have come out in 2014-and 2015. The first one was a story featured on National Public Radio about an atheist blogger named Avijit Roy, a Bangladeshi-born US citizen who was stabbed to death in Dhakka in February. In March, another atheist blogger, Washiqur Rahman was hacked to death, again in Dhakka. And just last month, another secular blogger, Ananta Bijoy Das was murdered by machete on a busy street, also in Bangladesh. Das was a 33 year old banker who was also an editor of a quarterly magazine called Jukti (Logic) and he head a science-based and rationalist council. He won the publications annual rationalist award in 2006 for “his deep and courageous interest in spreading humanist ideals and messages.” It reminded me of the incredible privilege we have in this country to be able to speak freely about religious ideas; for me to be able to preach a sermon on atheism without fear of harm or recrimination; in fact, perhaps this sermon title drew some of you off the street wondering how you could “preach” a “sermon” about “atheism” in a “church.” Well, I’m proud to say, that Unitarian Universalists have done this formally, since the beginning of the 20th century and probably informally, long before that.

Lest we get too smug about this country’s tolerance of atheists, think about the efforts of Michael Newdow – remember him? He was the California dad who made the news in 2005 because he didn’t want his daughter to have to say “One nation, under God” in school while reciting the pledge of allegiance. He tried to get the phrase “In God We Trust” removed from U.S. coins and banknotes. He went to court to try to strike the inaugural words “so help me God” at the end of the oath taken by the President of the United States. All of these attempts were ultimately rejected. So in this country, which is mostly proud of its separation of church and state, it seems to be culturally mandatory that every President must say “so help me God” when taking the oath, and end every speech with “God Bless You and God bless these United States of America.” To do nothing less would be considered unpatriotic and un-Christian.

There are a few blows being struck within the USA for a freedom of religion that I includes the freedom NOT to have a religion. I also read an article about an ordinance that was passed this year in Madison, Wisconsin, on April 1, 2015 – (and no, this is not an April Fools Day joke!) In what is believed to be a first of its kind in the United States, the Common Council of Madison, WI has voted to amend the city’s equal opportunities ordinance to include “non- religion” as a protected class. The legislation adds atheists to the categories of people who could potentially face discrimination. This move was prompted by the recent spate of “religious freedom” laws put forth in Indiana, where a controversial new law is seen as allowing business to refuse service to people based on their sexual orientation or gender identity. So, I guess that means if you ask a baker in Madison to create a cake that says “God is Dead” and are refused such service on religious grounds, you have a legal claim of discrimination in the city of Madison, WI. So, to the citizens of Madison: I say – “Praise God” (who may or may not exist) and -- let everyone eat cake !!

Why is atheism seen as such a threat to some of the citizens of Bangladesh that they would murder three individuals who wrote a blog about science, reason, and suggesting that not believing in God could be a moral choice? Why is atheism so feared in this country that we are afraid to remove references to God in government, as if this God – assuming she exists at all – would care that God’s name is on our money or in a human-made Pledge of Allegiance? Religious self-righteousness, whether it’s Christian or Muslim or Hindu or Buddhist, seems to rooted quite deeply in our human psyche, and yet this touches on the very reason why we go to this church and why even atheists might need a church – like this one.

When you walked into this church from the east parking lot entrance, you walked under a sign that says “one church, many paths.” That phrase was decided upon by this congregation about ten years ago when we were looking for a simple tag line that could best describe in six words or less, the spirit of this congregation. One of the many paths of this church is atheists. When I describe our faith to people who aren’t familiar with it, I revel in the look of surprise on their face when I say “we have Christians – and Buddhists – and Pagans – and Humanists – and Agnostics – and Atheists.” And inevitably, they stop at the atheists and ask “why would an atheist want to belong to a church?” I intend to answer that question, in Part II of the sermon.

**Reading**

*Last Minute Message for a Time Capsule*Philip Appleman

I have to tell you this, whoever you are: that on one summer morning here,

the ocean pounded in on tumbledown breakers,  
a south wind, bustling along the shore, whipped the froth into little rainbows,  
and a reckless gull swept down the beach as if to fly were everything it needed.  
I thought of your hovering saucers, looking for clues,

and I wanted to write this down, so it wouldn't be lost forever - -  
that once upon a time we had meadows here, and astonishing things,  
swans and frogs and luna moths and blue skies that could stagger your heart.

We could have had them still, and welcomed you to earth,

But we also had the righteous ones who worshipped the True Faith, and Holy War.

When you go home to your shining galaxy, say that what you learned  
from this dead and barren place is to beware the righteous ones.

**Sermon – Part II**

Langston Hughes, Philip Appleman and Sarah McLaughlan may seem at first glance to have very little in common. Langston Hughes was an African American man living in the early part of the 20th century who challenged the assumptions of American Cultural Christianity; Philip Appleman, a white male poet, was a signer of the 2003 Humanist Manifesto and Sarah McLaughlan, is a female Canadian singer-songwriter and creator of the Lilith Fair. All three have expressed through their poems and songs a deep suspicion of religion and of the “righteous ones,” the ones who make “dead and barren places” because of their religious faith. This suspicion of religion is the reason some people come to Unitarian Universalism and why others who share our values and beliefs might avoid us. Maybe suspicion of religion is what attracted some of you came here – maybe it’s even why some of you joined, because you too, are mistrustful of “the righteous ones,” the ones who are quick to judge those who don’t share the same understanding of their God. We know those folks. Some of them are in our families. Some of them are our co-workers. Many of them take up a lot of air time in various political events. Many insist that God’s name be inserted in the public sphere. They’re the ones who are angry that the Americans for Separation of Church and State successfully argued that the opera “I am Martol,” performed at Willoughby South High School, using the music of Ola Gjeilo, and featuring overtly Christian religious themes, was not permitted to be shown in a public high school setting. In this kind of God-soaked environment, it’s natural for an atheist to feel outnumbered and ostracized. They – perhaps you – have only a few options. You can ignore religion and live life as always; you can engage with other atheists on-line or in organizations like the American Humanist Association or American Atheists. Just recently in some places, you can amble into the Sunday Assembly, a British-based Atheist Gathering that meets on Sunday mornings; or you can make a choice that other atheists have made for a hundred years, and come to a Unitarian Universalist Church, that seeks to be the one church that truly does have many paths. One of those paths declares that you can have no belief in God at all and still be a respected and beloved and involved member of the church, no questions asked.

But “Church”! Why does it have to be called a “church”? Why would an atheist go to “church?” when even the very word “church “ evokes tall steeples, stained glass crucifiction windows and male preachers intoning about the wages of sin is death? Why deal with all that church-y stuff when you can have more fun sitting in a coffee shop on a Sunday morning? So what’s in “church” for the atheist? I think there are at least three reasons why atheists might give up the church of Starbucks for a place like West Shore – namely Accountability, Authenticity and Community.

One of the most important insights that atheists brought to our congregations in the early was the call for our tradition to be more precise in our use of religious language. Early on, the challenge was around the casual use of Jesus quote Christ un quote, and assuming that everyone knows what that means. Who or what is “Christ” for the religious liberal? Later, when Unitarian Universalism became more “spiritually” and less Christian focused; it was our atheist and humanist members who asked: “define “spirit” for me.” What does that mean? How do I know I have it? “ Instead of an easy and unquestioning acceptance of religious language, Unitarian Universailsts were challenged to be more accountable for their words and their theological language. As a result, Unitarian Universalists are forced to be more articulate than many about not only *what* you believe, but the very language you use to describe those beliefs.

The second aspect of being an atheist and/or humanist Unitarian Universalist is that it opened the door for people to be their authentic selves; to speak freely about their beliefs, including not having a belief in a God or Gods or Goddesses*.* A colleague of mine told the story of the day she finally let go of God. She said that she had been struggling with God for a long time and finally she realized that the *desire* to believe in God was larger than her actual *belief* in God. Her faith as a Unitarian Universalist had given her the choice to believe or not. She said sitting in a pew one Sunday morning, in a Unitarian Universalist church, it was if the shackles of belief were lifted from her shoulders and, she let go of God. She let go of the God of her childhood; she let go of the guilt of not having a God or praying to God; she let go of the burden of having to “believe” in God. She never looked back. It felt like saying goodbye to a childhood friend, perhaps a little melancholy at first, but then one quickly forgets the intensity of the relationship and moves on. Our faith gave her a way to discover an authentic relationship with the integrity of her own mind and heart.

The third reason an atheist would come to church – is the same reason all of us come here – regardless of our theological orientation. We come for community. We come because we are not only hard wired as meaning makers – as human beings who attempt to make meaning of our experiences – but because we’re social creatures and we truly need one another. Even the introverts. We need people to talk with about the profound experience of giving birth, of holding your baby in your arms; of struggling with your boss; of being alienated from your sister, of wondering why fundamentalists would rather kill than converse. We come because the church also brings to us art and music and poetry whose purpose is not to entertain us, but to inspire us towards a more graceful and insightful living. We need one another to engage in conversation about why good people die young; and why young people feel estranged from society and what the elders can teach us from their years of living.

We come because regardless whether I believe in and worship God and you couldn’t care less, you can still ask me about what it feels like to sit at the feet of a dying woman, massaging her heels; and I can ask you about the loss of your child fifty years ago and how that pain has remained, but also how it’s changed you. We never speak of God in those moments; we don’t outline the damage that religions have done in the form of pogroms and Crusades; we feel no need to defend or destroy God or faith or lack thereof. We speak instead of what’s common between us, and try to discern, as best we can, the invisible threads that run through our lives, connecting us through time and space; through grief and laughter, through the heart beat and pulse push of this one wild and precious life that we share *now*.

We come together – you and I – atheist and theist; Buddhist and Christian and Jew and Muslim and Hindu and Pagan; humanist and agnostic and free thinker and just plain vanilla Unitarian Universalist – which in fact, is a rich tasting cream in its own right. We come together to sharpen our intelligence; to kindle the flames of compassion; to open wide the human heart; to learn what is our authentic self. We come together to be accountable to something greater than ourselves; realizing that we humans may not be the measure of all things; that there are mysteries greater than the human mind alone can comprehend; and we need to stand back and stare at the face of such mysteries together, like the way we stand in awe of the ordinary rainbow after a storm. We come together in community, because there is something in the human heart that longs for meaning and a way to share that meaning with others. At the end of our arguments about God, Gods, Goddesses or no God, is an experience of something we can together call Holy – an experience of mystery, awe, wonder, hope regained, lives reclaimed and death accepted with grace and humility and wonder. In the end, we find together the music, and the poetry and the silence that can carry us across the chasm of what divides us. I keep returning to a poem by David Whyte; we’ve read it to you before, but it bears repeating, for I think it speaks to both the theist and the atheist within all of us; one part longing for certainty and another for science; one part skeptic and one part mystic. This is why an atheist comes to church, and you can believe it – or not, of course.

It doesn't interest me if there is one God or many gods.  
I want to know if you belong or feel abandoned.  
If you know despair or can see it in others.  
I want to know if you are prepared to live in the world with its harsh need to change you.

If you can look back with firm eyes saying this is where I stand.

I want to know if you know how to melt into that fierce heat of living  
falling toward the center of your longing.

I want to know if you are willing  
to live, day by day, with the consequence of love  
and the bitter unwanted passion of your sure defeat.

I have heard, in that fierce embrace, even the gods speak of God.